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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problem of African American adult literacy not as a problem of individuals, but as a problem integrally connected to African American communities. Part 1 describes the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) and provides an overview of results for African Americans. The NALS sample was composed of approximately 13,600 adults, with oversamples of African Americans and Hispanic Americans to provide data for meaningful generalizations and comparisons. Parts 2 and 3 suggest that literacy proficiency is linked to social and economic problems facing African Americans, problems that prevent far too many African Americans from reaching full development. Part 4 discusses literacy proficiency in the context of development. This section suggests a framework for discussions of literacy based on a concept of development that encompasses the individual, the family, and the community. Part 5 presents some recommendations regarding policies and practices to improve African American adult literacy. (Contains 13 tables and 29 references.) (SLD)

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AFRICAN AMERICAN ADULT LITERACY: A Look at the National Adult Literacy Survey

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1996

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INTRODUCTION:
A QUEST FOR MEANING

Sixty-three years ago, William Edward Burghardt DuBois (1931: p.65) wrote of the significant educational gains made by African Americans over the previous generation:

> In 1895, there were not more than 1,000 Negro students of full college grade in the United States. Today, there are over 19,000 in college and nearly 150,000 in high schools. In 1895, sixty percent of American Negroes, ten years of age or over, were illiterate.

Suppose that DuBois were alive today to survey the progress made by the descendants of enslaved Africans. He might note that 29% had completed 1 or more years of college. Nearly 12% had completed 4 or more years of college. Two-thirds of African Americans, 15-years-of-age and older, had completed 4 years of high school. Current graduation data would reveal to him a high school completion rate for African Americans, ages 19-20, of nearly 73%.

DuBois was an astute social scientist, who also recognized that the development of human potential could not be measured simply in terms of statistics and percentages. In the same essay (1931: p.63), he observed that

> ...any formal education for slaves or the children of slaves not only awakened widespread and deep-seated doubt, fear and hostility...but it posed, for statesmen and thinkers, the whole question as to what the education of Negroes was really aiming at, and indeed, what was the aim of educating any working class.

The central argument of this paper is that one of the purposes of education, including adult education, is to prepare individuals to live as productive members of society, able to contribute to their own learning and improvement as well as the learning and improvement of others (community). Our education institutions must be held accountable for receiving and adequately serving those who come to their doors regardless of social and economic challenges. In fact, our institutions must help individuals respond to and overcome social and economic challenges they face.

Public education institutions for the most part have not been successful in achieving this purpose. While the following discussion will focus on the literacy of African Americans, it is clear that overall, many children complete secondary school without acquiring the competencies and skills they will need for meaningful participation in the social, political and economic life of the nation. Too many receive an unfocused, general education.

In 1993, the Educational Testing Service, under contract with the National Center for Education Statistics, published the results of the National Adult Literacy Survey (Kirsch et al, 1993). The survey was conducted to fill the need for accurate and detailed information on the English literacy skills of America's adults.

Survey results are consistent with other socioeconomic indicators of African American progress and reflect the harmful

consequences of poverty, including unemployment, underemployment, isolation, and frequently, cynicism regarding the actual value of effort. The survey documents the chronic under-development of a large segment of the African American population.

EDUCATION, LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Jeff Howard of the Efficacy Institute (1990: 1) defines development as a process of building: a constructive personal identity (including a sense that "I am a decent person," and "I am a person committed to learning"); the ethics and character required to be a constructive factor in the lives of others; the analytic and operational capability required to function in the world of work; and the self-confidence that serves as the psychological underpinning for a lifelong commitment to growth and learning.

Literacy is not a product of innate intelligence as some have argued; rather, it is a product of the extent to which a person has been adequately engaged in a process of development.

Despite the low level of literacy proficiency of the nation's population and particularly of African Americans, the traditional structures and practices of education and training appear to remain largely the same. However, what would education look like if adult and continuing education programs universally adopted as mission and practice, the principles undergirding the definition of

literacy used to guide the National Adult Literacy Survey: "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential?"

Continuing and adult education would draw upon a knowledge base of successful practice and would be characterized by accessibility, and relevance and contextualization.

Knowledge Base of Successful Practice. Organization, training, outreach, recruitment, retention, linkages and other program areas would incorporate lessons that have learned through research and evaluation.

Accessibility. Programs would be situated in areas with high concentrations of need. Programs would be community-based, and targeted to serve adults most in need, the bulk of whom are not ordinarily served.

Relevance and Contextualization. Program designs would be adapted for congruence with the culture and background of the learners. Programs would help learners respond to and overcome the challenges they face daily. This paper will discuss the problem of African American adult literacy not as the problem of individuals, but as integrally connected to the problems facing many African American communities.

Part I of will describe the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) and provide an overview of results for African Americans.

As Parts II and III will suggest, literacy proficiency represents only one index of the social and economic problems facing African Americans. Based upon Howard's definition, far too many African Americans are undeveloped.

Part IV will provide a discussion of literacy proficiency in the context of the of development. This section will suggest a framework for discussions of literacy based upon a concept of development that encompasses the individual, family, and community.

Finally, Part V will present recommendations regarding policies and practices for African American adult literacy.

PART I:
OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY RESULTS FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

> We must find out exactly what his background is, what he is today, what his possibilities are, and how to begin with him where he is and make him a better individual of the kind that he is.
> --Carter G. Woodson

In 1993, the Educational Testing Service, under contract with the National Center for Education Statistics, published the results of the National Adult Literacy Survey (Kirsch et al, 1993). The survey was conducted to fill the need for accurate and detailed information on the English literacy skills of America's adults.

The problem of defining literacy and of assessing literacy proficiency is complex. Indeed, the concept of literacy has evolved over time. Literacy was once thought of as something one had or did not. The NALS approached literacy as a continuum of inter-related skills that are called into play to accomplish diverse types of tasks.[1]

Three scales were developed to help categorize and measure foundation skills and knowledge: prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy. The survey instrument was

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[1] Prose Literacy -- knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts including editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction
Document Literacy -- knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in materials that include job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and graphs
Quantitative Literacy -- knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials

designed to reflect five levels of literacy ranging from one to five, less to more challenging, respectively.

The survey sample comprised approximately 13,600 adults, ages 16 years and older. African Americans and Hispanics were oversampled in order to provide data for meaningful generalizations and comparisons. While African Americans make up approximately 11 percent of the nation's population, the survey sample size was slightly more than 19 percent. Additionally, the survey included 480 African Americans among a sample of more than 1,100 inmates in federal and state prisons.

The prison sample differed from the total population in that adults in prison were more likely to be younger. They were also more likely to be African American or Latino. The large number of African Americans in the prison sample reflects this group's overrepresentation in the prison population. For example, while African Americans make up 11% of the nation's household population, they formed approximately 44% of the prison population.

Tables 1-3 provide a summary of NALS results for average prose, document and quantitative literacy levels by race and ethnicity. The data presented in these tables show significant differences in average literacy proficiency (prose, document and quantitative) across racial/ethnic groups.

According to the report, the "average differences in prose, document and quantitative proficiencies between White and African American adults are 49, 50, and 63 points, respectively" (p35). African American, Native American/Alaskan Native, Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander adults were more likely than White adults to perform in the lowest two literacy levels (pxvi).

TABLE 1:
PROSE LITERACY LEVELS AND AVERAGE LITERACY PROFICIENCIES
BY RACE/ETHNICITY (PERCENTAGE IN LEVEL)

GROUP	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
WHITE	14	25	36	21	4
AFRICAN AMERICAN	38	37	21	4	0
ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	35	25	25	12	2
NATIVE AMERICAN	25	39	28	7	1
OTHER	53	23	15	9	0
LATINO/MEXICAN	54	25	16	4	0
LATINO/CUBAN	53	24	17	6	1
LATINO/PUERTO RICAN	47	32	17	3	0
LATINO/CENTRAL AMERICAN	56	22	17	4	0
LATINO/OTHER	25	27	33	13	2

SOURCE:U.S Department of Education, National Center for Statistics, National Adult Literacy Survey, 1992.
NOTE: Percentages below .5 are rounded to 0

TABLE 2:
DOCUMENT LITERACY LEVELS AND AVERAGE LITERACY PROFICIENCIES BY RACE/ETHNICITY (PERCENTAGE IN LEVEL)

GROUP	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
WHITE	16	27	34	19	3
AFRICAN AMERICAN	43	36	18	3	0
ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	34	25	28	12	2
NATIVE AMERICAN	27	37	29	7	0
OTHER	52	22	15	9	2
LATINO/MEXICAN	54	25	16	4	0
LATINO/CUBAN	48	30	16	4	O
LATINO/PUERTO RICAN	49	29	18	3	0
LATINO/CENTRAL AMERICAN	53	25	16	4	0
LATINO/OTHER	28	26	32	12	2

SOURCE: U.S Department of Education, National Center for Statistics, National Adult Literacy Survey, 1992.
NOTE: Percentages below .5 are rounded to 0

TABLE 3:
QUANTITATIVE LITERACY LEVELS AND AVERAGE LITERACY PROFICIENCIES BY RACE/ETHNICITY (PERCENTAGE IN LEVEL)

GROUP	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
WHITE	14	24	35	21	5
AFRICAN AMERICAN	46	34	17	3	0
ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	30	23	17	3	0
NATIVE AMERICAN	33	32	28	7	1
OTHER	49	21	22	6	2
LATINO/MEXICAN	54	25	17	4	0
LATINO/CUBAN	46	20	25	6	3
LATINO/PUERTO RICAN	51	28	17	3	1
LATINO/CENTRAL AMERICAN	53	25	18	4	0
LATINO/OTHER	31	25	31	11	1

SOURCE: U.S Department of Education, National Center for Statistics, National Adult Literacy Survey, 1992.
NOTE: Percentages below .5 are rounded to 0

The NALS indicated that slightly more than 20 percent of survey respondents demonstrated performance at Level I proficiency across all three areas of literacy (i.e., prose, document, and quantitative). Four major characteristics of this group emerged:

- Relatively large percentages of those who demonstrated Level I performance were African American, Hispanic, or Asian/ Pacific Islander (Table 6). This finding is consistent with data regarding the educational attainment of African Americans. As shown throughout this paper, on

every indicator of attainment (years of education, graduation rate, college attendance rates, assessments of achievement), African Americans, as a total group, underperform commensurate with their percentage of the population.

- One-third was age 65 or older. According to U.S. Bureau of the Census data, in 1991, 27.4% of African Americans below the poverty level were 65 years and older. Slightly less than 10% of whites below the poverty level were 65 years or older.

- Approximately one-fourth reported physical, mental, or health conditions that precluded full participation in work and other activities. Nineteen percent reported having vision problems that inhibited their ability to read print.

- This group reflected a relatively low level of educational attainment. Eighty-five percent possessed a high school diploma or its equivalence or less.

The results of the NALS for the prison population also support the existence of a powerful relationship among the variables of education, literacy, and poverty. The adult prison sample tended to be less educated than adults in the nation as a whole. On each of the literacy scales, the prison population performed significantly worse than the total population.

According to *Literacy Behind Prison Walls: Profiles of the Prison Population from the National Adult Literacy Survey* (October 1994), the average literacy proficiency of African Americans in the prison population was similar to that of African American adults in the household population, although African American adults in the

prison population possessed about a year less education than those in the household population. More than half of the Black prisoners, compared with about one-third of Black adults in the household population, had not completed high school.

About two-thirds of prisoners reported working in the month prior to their arrest. Half of this group earned less than $1,000 per month. The low earnings are consistent with findings reported elsewhere in this paper that show a correlation between education and employment.

While many factors might provide some insight into the reasons why so many adults demonstrated proficiency at the lowest levels, two specific factors emerge in an analysis of the status of African Americans in the United States. While this group is diverse, and represented at every level of occupation and educational certification, disproportionate numbers of African Americans can be characterized as possessing a low level of educational attainment and high incidence of poverty.

For example, 38% of African American adults performed at the lowest level (Level 1) of prose, document and quantitative literacy, as compared to 14% of White adults. Only Latinos of all groups with the exception of Other performed lower than African American adults at Level 1.

With respect to the highest level of prose, document and

quantitative literacy proficiency, less than .5% of African American adults performed at Level 5, as compared to White adults whose average proficiency at Level 5 was 4%, 3% and 5%, respectively. Only Puerto Ricans performed lower than African Americans at Level 4 (prose, document and quantitative).

That poverty and low educational attainment are linked is, in some quarters, a matter of debate. Nevertheless, it is unrefutable that "individuals demonstrating higher levels of literacy were more likely to be employed, work more weeks in a year, and earn higher wages than individuals demonstrating lower proficiencies" (Kirsch et al, 1993: xvii).

Thirty-eight percent of the African American respondents to the NALS performed at the lowest proficiency level in prose literacy. Forty-three percent performed at the lowest level in document literacy; 46% performed at the lowest quantitative literacy level. In the highest proficiency levels (prose, document, and quantitative literacy) African Americans constituted in each instance, less than 1% of the total respondents.

As these results and other data suggest, current education policies and practices appear to be incongruent with the ideals of literacy expressed within the NALS. Policies and practices have not resulted in effective literacy proficiency for a substantial number of African American adults.

PART II:
ECONOMIC STATUS AND ADULT LITERACY

Consistent with other measures of underdevelopment presented in this paper, African Americans realize considerably less income from earnings relative to national norms. More than half of all African American families realize incomes of less than $25,000. This compares to less than 30 percent of white families (Table 4).

TABLE 4: FAMILY INCOME, 1991 BY RACE (IN PERCENT)

INCOME LEVEL	ALL RACES	AFRICAN AMERICANS	WHITE
UNDER $10,000	10%	26%	7%
$10-$24,999	22%	30%	22%
$25-$34,999	16%	14%	16%
$35-$49,999	20%	15%	20%
$50,000/OVER	32%	15%	34%

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, 1991
NOTE: figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding)

The National Adult Literacy Survey found that adults with limited literacy proficiency were less likely to be employed than those with greater proficiency. In addition, those adults with the highest proficiency level were more likely to earn more and to work more weeks during the year.

Given the relatively low levels of educational attainment and considering the relatively high levels of poverty experienced by African Americans, one would expect to observe differentials regarding employment status and earnings. Table 5 does indeed show that African Americans are disproportionately employed in lower level occupations.

TABLE 5:
EMPLOYMENT OF MALES AND FEMALES BY RACE, 16 YEARS AND OVER BY OCCUPATION IN 1992 (BY PERCENT)

OCCUPATION	ALL RACES		AFRICAN AMER.		WHITE	
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
MANAGERIAL/ PROFESSIONAL	26	27	14	20	27	29
TECHNICAL, SALES, ADMIN SUPPORT	21	44	17	38	21	45
SERVICE	10	18	19	28	9	17
PRECISION PRODUCTION, CRAFT, REPAIR	19	2	15	2	20	2
OPERATORS, FABRICATORS, LABORERS	20	8	31	12	19	7

U.S. Bureau of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *The Black Population in the United States: March 1992, page 63*
NOTE: percentages rounded; percentages less than .5% shown as 0

In addition, the duration of unemployment among the economically poor African American adult population was on average

twice that of correspondingly poor whites U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993). More than twice the proportion of African American poor did not work at all. African American poor worked considerably less time and were more often unemployed (Tables 6-7).

TABLE 6:
PERCENTAGE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND WHITE POPULATION, 15 YEARS AND OLDER, BELOW THE POVERTY LEVEL, AND EMPLOYED IN 1991

TIME WORKED	PERCENT BELOW POVERTY (AFRICAN AMERICAN)	PERCENT BELOW POVERTY (WHITE)
50-52 WKS	7	3
49 WKS OR LESS	29	12

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *The Black Population in the United States: March 1992.*
NOTE: rounded to nearest percent

TABLE 7:
PERCENTAGE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND WHITE POPULATION, 15 YEARS AND OLDER, AND BELOW THE POVERTY LINE: ACCORDING TO DURATION OF UNEMPLOYMENT

DURATION OF UNEMPLOYMENT	PERCENT UNEMPLOYED BELOW POVERTY LINE (AFRICAN AMERICAN)	PERCENT UNEMPLOYED BELOW POVERTY LINE (WHITE)
1-4 WEEKS	24	12
5-14 WEEKS	21	11
15-26 WEEKS	30	17
27 WEEKS OR MORE	44	27
DID NOT WORK	48	18

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *The Black Population in the United States: March 1992.*

NOTE: rounded to nearest percent

African American families are beset dis-proportionately by poverty. Predictably, the large percentage of one-parent homes, usually headed by females, is reflected in a lower median family income among African Americans. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1993), the median income of Black female-headed households was only $11,410 in 1991. Sixty-eight percent of these female-headed households fell below poverty level.

The growth of female-headed households is an ominous indicator when data are considered that show a high correlation between such households and poverty. Indeed, the NALS shows that

> Adults in the lower literacy levels were far more likely than those in the higher levels to be in poverty and were far more likely to be on food stamps than to report receiving interest from savings (page 60).

Nearly half of African American children lived in poverty. Many of these children must face daily the impact of poverty along with its attendant ills such as poor health and nutrition, substandard housing, and crime.

In 1991, more than a fifth of all children under 18-years-old lived in poverty. Twelve percent of all white youths lived in poverty. The number of all children living in poverty increased between 1970 and 1991; African American and Latino children

contributed most to the increase (Table 8).

TABLE 8: CHILDREN UNDER 18 YEARS OLD LIVING IN POVERTY (IN THOUSANDS)

YEAR	TOTAL	% CHILDREN UNDER 18 IN POVERTY	AFRICAN AMERICAN	WHITE	LATINO
1970	10,235	26.5	2,383	2,247	---
1980	11,114	17.9	2,944	2,813	809
1985	12,483	20.1	3,181	3,372	1,247
1991	13,658	21.1	3,853	3,941	1,398

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, *Youth Indicators 1993: Trends in the Well-Being of American Youth*, October 1993.

While the largest group of poor children were white, African American children were more than three times as likely as their white counterparts to be living in poverty and Latino children were 2.6 times as likely as white children to be living in poverty. The poverty rate for children under 18 was higher than for any other age group (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1988). Half of poor African Americans were either children under age 18 (46%) or elderly (8%).

Literacy and education are linked to economic opportunity and prosperity. The increase of poverty which can in part be attributed to unemployment and underemployment, and in part to the

changing nature of the family, threatens to erode educational gains achieved by African Americans over the last 50 years.

PART III:
EDUCATION AND LITERACY

Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey (1993: 25) reports that

> ...among all the variables explored in the survey, the level of education attained in the United States has the strongest relationship with demonstrated literacy proficiency.

NALS results therefore draw a correlation between level of educational attainment and literacy proficiency. This correlation is striking across all categories of literacy at Level 1.

Undeniably, African Americans have made dramatic progress in terms of education. Nearly 83% of African Americans, ages 25 to 34, had completed high school in 1991 (Table 9).

Several factors, however, must be taken into account in evaluating this progress, for example, the large number of African Americans who leave school before obtaining a high school diploma; low percentages of African Americans who enter and complete higher education; and evidence that many who do graduate from high school have not mastered many skills and proficiencies required for post-secondary education or for success in the labor market. In addition, African Americans have completed fewer years of schooling than the nation's population as a whole (Table 9).

The NALS found that average literacy proficiency did indeed rise across the entire range of education levels. The study also found a relationship between parents' educational attainment and that of respondents. However, the disparity in literacy proficiency between African American and White adults was evidenced across all levels of educational attainment. According to the report,

> for the most part, differences in average proficiencies among minority subgroups are reduced when comparisons are made only among individuals with the same levels of education. Even when one controls for level of education, however, large differences in average performance continue to be observed (Kirsch et al, p35).

One possible reason for the differences in performance between African American and White adults even after controls for level of education is the quality of schooling experienced by African Americans as a group. This possibility is discussed in Part IV.

TABLE 9:
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, US AND AFRICAN AMERICAN TOTALS, 1991, 25 TO 34 YEARS OLD (IN PERCENT)

LEVEL COMPLETED	US TOTAL	AFRICAN AMERICAN
9TH GRADE OR LESS	4	3
HS GRAD	85	83
SOME COLLEGE	25	24
BA DEGREE OR MORE	21	11

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, 1991
NOTE: #s in Table do not add to 100% because categories are not mutually exclusive.

COLLEGE-GOING POPULATION

That poverty and inadequate education have contributed to the underdevelopment of African Americans as a whole is demonstrated by an examination of indicators of proficiency of the African American college-going population. A look at the test scores of college-going youth is revealing. Although many questions persist regarding the reliability of standardized tests in predicting the later college performance of high school youth, the tests when taken as a constant measure indicate that African American student performance continues to lag behind national averages, despite an increase in mathematics and verbal scores.

African Americans made up less than 8 percent of the enrollment in public institutions of higher education in 1991, and 2 percent of the enrollment in private colleges and universities (Table 10).

TABLE 10:
TOTAL ENROLLMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION, PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE
FALL, 1991 (IN THOUSANDS)

RACE	TOTAL	PUBLIC	PERCENT	PRIVATE	PERCENT
TOTAL	14,359	11,310	79	3,049	21

AFRICAN AMERICAN	1,335	1,053	7	282	2
HISPANIC	867	742	5	125	1
ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	637	516	4	121	1
NATIVE AMERICAN	114	100	1	14	0*

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, 1991.
*Less than .5%

Among the pool of African Americans taking the SAT, there has been a 20 point increase in scores on the verbal section (Table 11) and 31 point increase on the mathematics section (Table 12) between 1976 and 1992. However, these scores fall significantly below what many consider an already seriously low national mean for both verbal (423 out of 800) and mathematics (476 out of 800) scores.

TABLE 11:

SAT AVERAGES BY ETHNIC GROUP, 1976-1992: VERBAL

GROUP	1976	1985	1988	1990	1992	CHANGE FROM 1976 to 1992
NATIVE AMERICAN	388	392	393	388	395	+7
ASIAN AMERICAN	414	404	408	410	413	-1
AFRICAN AMERICAN	332	346	353	352	352	+20
MEXICAN AMERICAN	371	382	362	380	372	+1
PUERTO RICANS	364	368	355	359	366	+2
OTHER HISPANIC	NA	NA	387	383	383	NA

WHITES	451	449	445	442	442	-9
ALL STUDENTS	431	431	428	424	423	-8

SOURCE: The College Board, 1992 Profile of SAT and Achievement Test Takers, New York, 1992.

TABLE 12:

SAT AVERAGES BY ETHNIC GROUP, 1976-1992: MATHEMATICS

GROUP	1976	1985	1988	1990	1992	CHANGE FROM 1976 TO 1992
NATIVE AMERICAN	420	428	435	437	442	+22
ASIAN AMERICAN	518	518	522	528	532	+14
AFRICAN AMERICAN	354	376	384	385	385	+31
MEXICAN AMERICAN	410	426	428	429	425	+15
PUERTO RICANS	401	409	402	405	406	+5
OTHER HISPANIC	NA	NA	433	434	433	NA
WHITES	493	490	490	491	491	-2
ALL STUDENTS	472	475	476	476	476	+4

SOURCE: The College Board, 1992 Profile of SAT and Achievement Test Takers, New York, 1992.

Consistent with this trend, the National Center for Education Statistics in 1991 reported a continuous decline in the number of white 13-year-olds performing below modal grade level (i.e., grade in which most students of an age are enrolled). Therefore, the fact that African American students have narrowed the gap with white students on the SAT must be viewed with guarded optimism.

PARENTS' LEVEL OF EDUCATION

NALS respondents' scores rose with the number of years of education completed by their parents. Respondents who demonstrated

higher levels of proficiency reported that their parents had completed more years of education than those who demonstrated lower proficiency.

This finding is consistent with data presented in Table 13. These data indicate a correlation between parent education level and student SAT scores. For both African American and white SAT-takers, scores increase with the level of parent education. However, African American students score substantially lower than white students in each parent education level. Thus, African American students whose parents have obtained a graduate degree score a cumulative 834 on the SAT, while white students whose parents have obtained the same level score 1018, a difference of 84 points.

TABLE 13: SAT SCORES AND PARENTAL EDUCATION

PARENT EDUCATION LEVEL	AFRICAN AMERICAN	WHITE	ALL
HS DIPLOMA	708	868	837
BACHELOR'S DEGREE	784	961	943
GRADUATE DEGREE	834	1018	1006

SOURCE: The College Board, 1992 Profile of SAT and Achievement Test Takers, New York, 1992.

READING PROFICIENCY AND LITERACY

The reading proficiency of African American elementary and

secondary school students lags far behind the student population as a whole. For example, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement reported in 1988 that 78% of White 9-year-olds and 11% of White 17-year-olds and read below intermediate level. The corresponding percentage for African Americans of the same age was 95% and 34%, respectively.

In 1990, the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported performance gaps in reading proficiency between White and African American students of 35 points for 9-year-olds, 20 points for 12-year-olds, and 30 points for 17-year-olds.

What the data presented in this section indicate is that in general terms, African Americans go to school for fewer years. Proportionately fewer graduate from high school and go on to higher education. In addition, among those who graduate from high school, their level of proficiency as measured by the SAT and other assessments is below the national average.

PART IV
DEFINING LITERACY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN ADULTS

> There could be no education that was not at once for use in earning a living and for use in living a life...nothing more perfect has been invented than this system of training youth. --- W.E.B. DuBois

The National Adult Literacy Survey is an accurate gauge of the overall development of the African American adult population as a whole. While there are significant variations within this population, ranging from the highest levels of demonstrated literacy proficiency to the lowest levels, it can be argued that African American adults are more likely to possess less education and lower levels of literacy proficiency, and to experience greater poverty than the nation as a whole. The results of the NALS document this national tragedy.

An interesting finding of the NALS is that many of those at the lowest levels of literacy proficiency do not perceive the need for greater proficiency. The data do not provide a clear answer to this anomaly. However, one could hypothesize that, given very real economic and social realities, many of those who demonstrate the least literacy proficiency levels do indeed possess the skills they need to face the opportunities that are available to them.

Even when level of education is controlled, there are still disparities in performance between African American and white adults. Why?

THE POWER OF EXPECTATIONS

A recent study, by the Educational Testing Service and National Urban League (1990) is instructive in this regard. The study, "On the Right Track", was commissioned to investigate the effects of ability grouping on mathematics achievement and was conducted in middle schools in six school districts. The study found that African American students were disproportionately placed in classes designated as low ability or in classes that emphasized basic math skills.

Within the high ability classes, the nature of teacher interactions with African American students, differed from interactions with white students: "...even when minority and white students were in the same math group, teachers tended to treat them differently." Teachers interacted considerably less with African American students and more frequently emphasized directive communication, short responses and correction as opposed to discussion, praise and affirmation when interacting with African American students. The different treatment occurred at all ability

level groupings.

What appeared to be working in the classrooms of the schools participating in the study, many of which disavowed tracking as an official policy, takes place in thousands of classrooms daily. There is a subtle belief, validated by the evidence of chronic underdevelopment, that African Americans can not be held to the highest standards of academic success. It is argued here that as a nation, we simply do not expect the same level of success as from other groups. Diminished or low expectations perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Literacy proficiency is not a gift to be bestowed upon an individual. It is a process of unlocking human potential. The low levels of literacy proficiency extant within a large percentage of the African American community are symptomatic of a greater issue of underdevelopment. The nation in general, and African Americans specifically, must begin to set higher expectations for what individuals and communities can do in order to develop themselves. At present, the nation lives down to its own low expectations regarding what all its people can accomplish.

In the State of Black America, 1993, Jeff Howard identifies the paradigm which seems to drive much of what is wrong with our system of human development. He describes this paradigm as "the

innate ability paradigm." Summarized briefly,

- Some individuals are highly intelligent, some moderately intelligent, and some not very intelligent.
- It is possible to determine the degree of intelligence required for a particular course of study, profession or career.
- Tests can be used to determine which individuals will be able to master particular skills or tasks.
- Inferences, based on observation, can also be used to assess an individual's ability.

Supposing that Dr. Howard is correct, and a considerable body of evidence suggests that he is, it would then follow that a major purpose of the education system is to determine an individual's degree of intelligence and ability, in order to engage him or her at a corresponding proficiency level. In such a system, right and wrong answers, rote memorization, test scores, objective observations of ability and concomitant levels of expectation become both the vehicles used to confirm whether or not one has "got it", or one "doesn't" and the pillars upon which to hang success or failure. Also, in such a system, individuals are placed in courses and curricula that correspond to expectations of their level of ability.

So what's wrong with that? Individuals develop their literacy proficiency or do not for a variety of reasons. However, most often, an individual's degree of literacy proficiency can be

equated with the degree of success he or she experiences in school.

Some individuals are forced to leave formal education early, directed by the need to become engaged in economic activity. More often, however, the reasons cited by individuals who have abandoned their pursuit of formal education and training include "lack of relevance," "can't see how what I'm doing in school will help me get a job," and "school is boring."

The National Center for Education Statistics' longitudinal study, "High School and Beyond" revealed that, among the survey sample, one of the major determinants of early school leaving was a lack of school success (Peng, 1983). This finding has been supported by other studies.

By now, it has become apparent that merely telling individuals that education is important is often not a very powerful inducement toward higher levels of learning, especially when they don't experience much success. Recent reform efforts, most notably those sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, affirm that learners relate best to things that make sense to them, that involve common patterns and relationships. Surface knowledge of the type that is often communicated in classrooms is different from

meaningful knowledge in that the former usually involves memorization; the latter actually makes sense to the learner.

The President and the National Governors' Association in 1990 established six education goals. One of these was: "By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship." The goal of national eminence in the global economy possesses an empty ring for those who face unemployment and underemployment and who live in conditions of abject poverty.

In the introduction to this paper it was argued that the question of purpose is integral to any meaningful discussion of literacy. A decent job; decent housing; decent services; ability to travel safely to and from the home: these are goals that have personal relevance and meaning. Therefore, it is suggested here that adult education policies intended to impact on African Americans should be based on an awareness, validated through numerous data, that many African American communities are themselves under-developed and that literacy programs and education in general must be utilized as resources for community development.

The problem of underdevelopment is not simply a matter of

individual need. One can visit the central cities of the nation, where many of the poor are concentrated, and each of these communities will look very much like another. Most will be beset by the same social and economic problems. The lives of the individuals are very much intertwined with the environments in which they live.

What this means is that both the pedagogy and content of adult education must be grounded in the learner's background -- his or her culture, environment, experiences, learning style, problems, interests and needs. Adult education must provide opportunities for adult learners to understand and respond to their environment in order to contribute to its improvement.

Adult literacy proficiency, then, should be seen as a process for empowering individuals to realize that they are capable of learning, and that learning will impact on the quality of their everyday lives, including what happens to them and around them, and building confidence in their ability to manage the process. The following section presents recommendations for developing such an approach to adult literacy proficiency.

PART V:
RECOMMENDATIONS

The Introduction section of this paper suggested that effective programs for continuing and adult education draw upon the nation's knowledge base of successful practice. It was also suggested that accessibility, and relevance and contextualization composed essential characteristics of successful programs and initiatives. In addition, it is argued here that the foundation for literacy proficiency is laid during early childhood.

RECOMMENDATION #1: BUILD A FOUNDATION FOR LITERACY PROFICIENCY

The first recommendation is based upon the recognition that the costs to society are greater when the foundation for effective lifelong learning is not adequately addressed during an individual's early years. Sharon Robinson (1987) recognized this reality in calling for:

> Community-based programs to assist African American parents to be effective advocates for their children and to assist parents to establish conditions in the home to support student achievement
>
> Establishment of early childhood development programs in every community
>
> Redefinition of compensatory education from remediation to acceleration. The old paradigm of remediation assumes deficiency rather than lack of opportunity

National, state local education agencies should establish provisions and mandates for re-inventing funded programs to provide quality early childhood education and training for parents/ guardians/families to support and strengthen their role as "first teachers."

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) has recognized the need for building an early foundation for literacy and the valuable role that families and communities can play. AAAS has supported Family Math, Family Science, and the Black Churches Project; programs that, in addition to helping children become more successful in school, contribute to the literacy proficiency of parents, guardians, and other concerned adults. These programs exemplify successful strategies for helping parents, guardians and other concerned adults recognize that, regardless of education or perceived skill level, they can help children achieve excellence in school.

RECOMMENDATION #2: BUILD ON THE KNOWLEDGE BASE OF SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE

An underutilized national resource is the educational research infrastructure. It is recommended here that the results of research related to adult literacy proficiency be systematically collected, reviewed and analyzed, and that promising practices and innovations be widely disseminated to policy makers and community-

based service providers.

Research on characteristics of successful programs for African American adult literacy proficiency is limited, and the findings are not widely disseminated. Among the few existing studies are the work of V. Denny (1992) and the Center for Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement (1993).

Their findings, based upon a small sample of informants, should be challenged, tested, supported, validated, and/or replicated as part of the nation's research agenda. The Office for Education Research and Improvement (OERI) sponsors regional education laboratories and centers. Together, the laboratories and centers represent a powerful mechanism for building, synthesizing and disseminating the nation's knowledge base regarding "best practices" with respect to adult literacy proficiency.

Specifically, OERI should convene a group of educators, practitioners and researchers to define what constitutes "best practices." This group might adopt or adapt existing criteria of program effectiveness, e.g., based on the Joint Dissemination Review Panel, National Diffusion Network. OERI should utilize the regional laboratory structure in order to identify successful programs and program components including funding, outreach, retention, placement and follow-up, and evaluation. Information on

these best practices should be disseminated widely to community organizations, as well as policy makers in the form and language appropriate to each group.

RECOMMENDATION #3: EXPAND ACCESS

Literacy proficiency and development services should be targeted to African American adults in greatest need, i.e., who have been incarcerated, who possess the lowest level of educational attainment, who do not possess the skills necessary to be self-sufficient, contributing members of the community. These services should be community-based and draw on community resources, for example, religious institutions, counseling programs, job placement programs. African Americans, including individuals from the community targeted for services, should be involved in planning, program development and program operation, and evaluation.

Adult Literacy in the United States (Hunter and Harmon, 1979) concluded with among others, a similar recommendation, including:

> establishment of new, pluralistic, community-based initiatives whose specific objective will be to serve the most disadvantaged hard-core poor, the bulk of whom never enroll in any existing program. These community-based initiatives would focus on persons in the community where they live.

Existence of services for adult learners does not necessarily constitute accessibility. Current and new initiatives to expand

literacy proficiency should focus on the factors that inhibit African American adult participation. Program accessibility pertains to a number of overarching conditions, including: location, cost, perceived value, and program design and quality.

For example, of the slightly more than 31 million African Americans who lived in the U.S. in 1992, the majority (83%) lived in metropolitan areas, i.e., including central city and suburbs; 56% were concentrated in central cities. The distribution of African Americans is important in considering strategies and designating resources targeted to African American adult literacy initiatives in close proximity to where they live.

Many African Americans, and particularly those most in need, do not access existing services for a number of reasons. For example, Denny (1992) reports focus group results indicating that participants did not perceive that further education would make a real difference in terms of available opportunities. Participants also expressed that negative school experiences had made it difficult to re-enter the education system as adults.

The Center for Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement reported on interviews with African-American adult learners. They did not appear to see the tangible rewards of attending adult basic education classes. In addition, they were

disenchanted with programs and staff, the latter comprising for the most part non-African Americans; and viewed formal education institutions as representatives of the "establishment" or the inside group and themselves as the "outsiders."

The workplace is also an under-utilized location for literacy proficiency development. A recent study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor provided a glimpse of opportunities for skill improvement training in the workplace (Table 15). In addition, according to the same report, most opportunities for work-based training are concentrated in the most highly technical or professional occupations.

Employers should be given incentives and assistance to invest in the further education and training of low skill workers and to pursue high productivity forms of work organization. For example, the Commission on Workforce Quality and Labor Market Efficiency (1989) recommended corporate income tax credit for education and training expenses, personal income tax exemption for all employer-provided education and training benefits, encouragement of multi-employer training programs.

TABLE 15:

PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYED WORKERS RECEIVING SKILL-IMPROVEMENT TRAINING ON CURRENT JOB, BY RACE, 1983 AND 1991

YEAR	WHITE	AFRICAN AMERICAN	HISPANIC	ALL OTHER
1983	36	28	23	32
1991	42	34	28	38

SOURCE: "How Workers Get Their Training: A 1991 Update," U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 1992.

RECOMMENDATION #4: FOCUS ON RELEVANCE FOR INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

Program methods and content should be related to the lives of adults as members of their neighborhood and community. Programs and services should be community-based, locally-directed, and should focus on concrete learning needs of African American adults growing out of specific issues affecting them and their community. Indeed, adult education should be viewed as a strategy for community improvement.

Programs should be action-oriented and should involve adults in "learning by doing" not in passive learning. Connections should be clear regarding applications of what is taught to the everyday interests, challenges and needs of learners. These connections include family life, housing, health, safety, and employment. Connections should also be made with other institutions, services and programs within the community that might provide service(s), e.g., health services, job placement, higher education extension

programs, counseling, substance abuse prevention or rehabilitation.

The problem of African American adult literacy is not simply the problem of individuals, but is related to the problems facing many African American communities as a whole. Therefore, solutions to the problem of adult literacy must necessarily involve schools, community organizations and institutions, business and industry.

Recently, Michigan and California turned to technology to test new models for empowering adult learners to have greater access to educational programs through a computer-based information system. Through the use of EduCards, utilizing credit card technology, learners gain access to an integrated Adult Education Data System. The system includes information about the learner as well as information on available services. The system also allows for "matching" learner profiles and needs with appropriate services.

The system can be accessed through community centers, neighborhood library branches and offices of social service agencies. Despite the success of several field tests of this model system, wide-spread implementation has been limited due to a lack of funding.

Finally, two common funding policies impact negatively on access to services by those in greatest need. The first, performance-based contracts, results in reimbursement of program

costs based upon limited success criteria (e.g., number of participants placed in jobs, awarded a GED). This policy discourages targeting those in greatest need in favor of serving individuals with the highest likelihood of meeting the criteria. The second, fixed time limitations for program participation, forces service providers to withdraw service from participants after a prescribed period of service, regardless of the amount of progress being made, or participants' need for additional service.

Funding policies and evaluation criteria related to adult education programs should be flexible. They should be based on a number of factors including number served, quality of the curriculum, linkages and referrals, and community assessment of program effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATION #5: IMPROVE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Programs in colleges and universities that prepare adult education professionals should be restructured to emphasize the cultural traits, behaviors, values, and attitudes that African Americans bring to the classroom.

Training programs should also focus on historical factors that have resulted in the underdevelopment of African Americans and their communities, including racial prejudice and low expectations, and strategies for individual and community empowerment. Training

should provide opportunities for visitations and practical field experiences in community-based cultural and social institutions.

CONCLUSION

Improvements in the quality of life within African American communities, specifically in the areas of employment, housing, and health care, will also ultimately impact positively on literacy proficiency. It is no accident that the lowest literacy proficiency levels are found among individuals who live in poverty. Poverty, particularly in urban areas, is generally attended by poor nutrition, and substandard housing. Efforts to develop adult literacy proficiency should also empower adults to address the problems of poverty through individual and collective effort.

African Americans must play a central role in addressing the problem of literacy proficiency, for example, as planners, program directors, instructors, and evaluators. The need for an African American role in seeking solutions to the problem of development is not a philosophical one. Current data show that for every African American who has attained a high degree of literacy proficiency, whether based on Dr. Howard's definition of development or the working definition of the NALS, three family members, friends or neighbors have not. Our futures are integrally intertwined.

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